

Beyond the basic BUTTERFLY BUSH

Our expert put nearly 50 varieties to the test so that you won't ever purchase a dud or a thug

BY RICHARD HAWKE

Few sights are as quintessentially associated with summer as butterflies perched on the blossoms of butterfly bush (*Buddleia* spp. and cvs., USDA Hardiness Zones 5–9). While the profusion and prodigious nature of the flower trusses catch our eye, the sweet nectar draws in a bevy of butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds. Although I'm particularly captivated by the deep purple flowers, I'm drawn to all colors and shades of butterfly bush. Whether held upright or gracefully arched, the blossoms are always stunning. The deliciously fragrant flowers bloom from early to mid-summer into fall, putting on a show when many plants are done or winding down.

It's not that butterfly-bush leaves are forgettable, but they do have a lot of competition. Typically gray-green to dark green with a white underside, leaf color can vary greatly among the hybrids, and new variegated cultivars tend to have a little more oomph. For all of their good qualities, butterfly bushes do have their issues. For one, they can be invasive in certain parts of the country (sidebar, left, p. 34). Winter hardiness can be a problem, as well. The following are a few varieties of butterfly bush that, in our trial, proved to be not only gorgeous but also reliable.

At a glance

SIZE: 2 to 7 feet tall and 3 to 8 feet wide

CONDITIONS: Full sun; well-drained, alkaline soil

SEASON: Flowers appear in early summer and can last through late fall. Foliage is evergreen in warm zones.

PESTS: Don't be fooled by their drought tolerance. Plants stressed by too much

drought will have trouble with spider mites.

PROPAGATION: Butterfly bushes are self-sowers. Due to their vigorous nature, I heartily recommend dead-heading fertile selections of these shrubs. Removing spent flowers will reduce reseeding and improve the late-season display.

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1. Adonis Blue™ (p. 30)
 2. 'Dartmoor'
 3. 'Red Plume'
 4. 'White Bouquet'
 5. 'Attraction'
 6. InSpired™ Violet
 7. 'Black Knight'
 8. 'Silver Frost'
 9. 'African Queen'
 10. 'White Harlequin'
 11. 'Pink Delight'
 12. Lo & Behold® Lilac Chip
 13. 'Santana'
 14. 'Bicolor'

TOP PERFORMERS that deserve some love



When **'Attraction'** (photo, bottom left) hit the garden centers, it was touted as an improvement over 'Royal Red', which is quite an accomplishment because 'Royal Red' is considered butterfly-bush royalty. Their flowers share a similar vivid red-purple color, abundance, and large size. Where 'Attraction' truly differed was that it maintained a neater, more compact habit. 'Attraction' was almost 18 inches shorter than 'Royal Red', making it a better fit in small spaces.

The sumptuous red-violet flowers of **'Red Plume'** (photo, top left), while not exactly true red, came closest to a real red—maybe someday soon a cultivar will finally cross that line. 'Red Plume' was a strong bloomer with colossal flowers that stretched from 12 to a whopping 16 inches long at peak. Never a shrinking violet, 'Red Plume' was one of the tallest plants in our trial, too.

'Silver Frost' had a low-key quality, with silvery green leaves and small trusses of milky white flowers. At 8 inches long, the flowers were on the short end of the scale but were profusely borne from midsummer to hard frost. 'Silver Frost' was a favorite of our evaluators every year—"tight balls" and "big, fat plants" were both used to positively describe its dense habit.

'Purple Haze' (top photo, p. 33) is just one of the compact and sterile cultivars in the groundbreaking Lo & Behold® series. Deep purple-blue flowers were copiously and continuously produced; because the plant is sterile, all energy is put into making flowers rather than seeds. Its countless blooms arched outward and downward atop low-spreading plants. Its short, compact habit makes 'Purple Haze' perfect for massing or using as a ground cover. The genetic makeup of the Lo & Behold® series includes a few species that are less suitable for cold regions, so winter hardiness was on our minds. Unlike Lo & Behold® 'Blue Chip', which has died in three consecutive winters, 'Purple Haze' has been reliably root-hardy.

'White Bouquet' (bottom photo, p. 33) is another unabashedly large and robust butterfly bush, with an impressive floral display to match its size. Starting from the ground every spring, 'White Bouquet'



grew steadily and swiftly at the start of the season, with a near-perfect rounded habit. The white flowers with yellowish throats nicely complemented the handsome, fine-textured, silvery green leaves.

'Bicolor' is a hybrid of *B. globosa* and *B. davidii** var. *magnifica*. The flowers resemble but are more open than those of *B. davidii** cultivars, with florets in rounded clusters loosely grouped along the stem. From purple buds, the flowers opened to pinky lavender with prominent orange eyes, before changing to orange from the bottom up. The coloring is truly unique and undeniably eye-catching. The habit was fairly dense but typically a bit looser than *B. davidii** cultivars. 'Bicolor' was one of a few butterfly bushes that were killed to the ground in the mildest winter.

'African Queen' is a beauty with dark violet florets jam-packed into 12-inch-long plumes. Like other butterfly bushes, the flower size was smaller after the first wave of blooms in midsummer. 'African Queen' had a robust habit with arching stems, which only added to the dramatic floral display. I found it somewhat surreal to watch these big plants grow, starting from nothing and getting nearly 7 feet tall in no time at all.

Sometimes knowing the story behind a name can increase your appreciation for a plant, and such was

the case with **Adonis Blue™**, a cultivar in the English Butterfly™ series, named after butterflies found in England. Adonis Blue™ features pretty blue-purple flowers, small gray-green leaves, and a well-branched compact habit. One of my favorite late-season pairings is this butterfly bush with a pure white-flowered Japanese anemone (*Anemone* × *hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert', Zones 4–8).



*This species might be considered aggressive or invasive in some areas. Visit invasiveplantatlas.org for more information.

Photos, except where noted: Danielle Sherry, p. 33 (top), courtesy of Proven Winners; p. 33 (bottom), p. 34 (top right), and p. 36 (top and bottom left), milletphotomedia.com; p. 34 (left), millet/courtesy of commons.wikimedia.org

DON'T IGNORE
THE INVASIVE ISSUE

I have mixed feelings about growing and promoting butterfly bushes. On the one hand, they are beautiful and reliable garden plants; on the other hand, their weedy nature cannot be denied. Keep these facts in mind before buying one of these shrubs:



- Their weedy to invasive nature is due to prolific seed production. Butterfly bushes are widely adaptable to a variety of conditions, easily settling into natural and disturbed landscapes—even concrete cracks (photo, above).
- During our six-year trial, seedlings were observed at nonweedy levels in our garden. Butterfly bush shouldn't be grown—or should be used with caution—in areas where they've become troublesome.
- *Buddleia davidii** is banned for sale in Oregon and Washington, where it is considered an invasive weed, and a number of other states from coast to coast have it on their watch lists.
- Only 20 states do not currently list *B. davidii** as a weedy or invasive problem.
- While deadheading and weeding out seedlings are helpful in reducing the potential spread of butterfly bush, plant breeders might be the answer to the problem. Myriad new seedless or low-fertility hybrids have trickled into the market in recent years.
- In 2011, Oregon approved the sale of cultivars that produce two percent or less viable seed. Oregon prohibits these sterile hybrids from being called butterfly bush because the name is too closely connected in commerce to *B. davidii**. In Oregon, these plants must be labeled as summer lilac, nectar bush, or seedless butterfly bush. The varieties listed below are considered “sterile”:

*B. davidii** ‘Asian Moon’
*B. davidii** ‘Miss Molly’
*B. davidii** ‘Miss Ruby’
Flutterby™ series
Lo & Behold® series



BASICS

Butterfly bush 101

Butterfly bushes are simple to grow. Once established, they are forgiving of drought conditions and seem unfazed by heat and humidity.

There's a reason for their name

The blossom nectar attracts a variety of North American butterflies, such as black swallowtail, eastern tiger swallowtail (photo, above), great spangled fritillary, monarch, painted lady, and western checkerspot. Butterfly bushes, however, are not host plants to any native caterpillars.

Not all soil conditions are suitable

Butterfly bushes are not fans of wet soils, which can cause the roots to rot.

A little maintenance goes a long way

Cut butterfly bushes back close to the ground—to about a foot tall—in late winter to early spring (photo, right). This practice eliminates twiggy habits, keeps the plants' size a bit smaller, and produces larger flowers.



Flowers come in several shapes and sizes

Each blossom is composed of many tiny florets, which are clustered in tapered spires from 4 to 20 inches long. For us, the inflorescences were commonly 2 to 3 inches wide at their broadest; however, at 9 inches wide, ‘Dartmoor’ (photo, p. 35) was the granddaddy of them all due to the side shoots below the main spire.

Pests and pollution aren't a problem

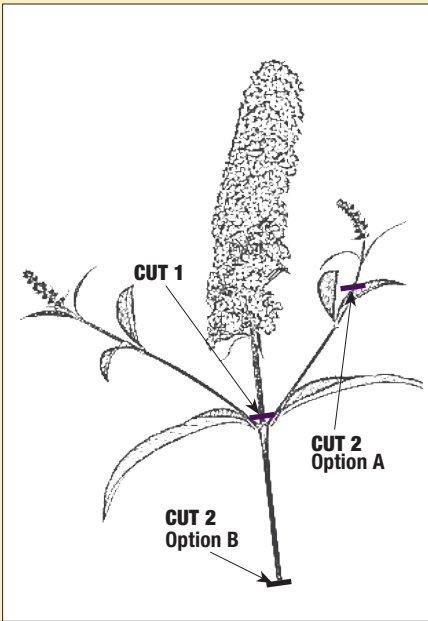
They are deer resistant and tolerant of urban pollution.

Bad winters will not mean nonexistent blooms

Because they bloom on new wood, stems lost in winter do not impact the summer flower show.

Deadheading reduces seeding and encourages reblooming

After the main bloom passes, cut it back to the main stem (CUT 1). After the secondary flowers die, you have two choices: Cut each back to just above the first set of substantial leaves (CUT 2: Option A), or tidy up the entire plant and reduce the number of pruning cuts by pruning back to the next set of leaves below the original inflorescences (CUT 2: Option B).

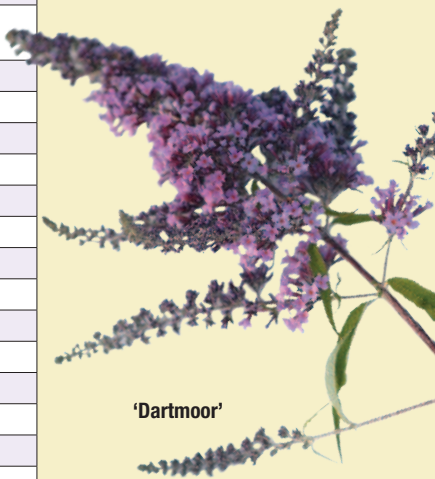


Overall rating	Name	Height	Width	Flower color	Flower size (length)	Bloom production
★★	<i>Buddleia alternifolia</i>	55 inches	66 inches	Lavender	7 inches	Moderate
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Adokeep’ (Adonis Blue™)	52 inches	73 inches	Blue-purple	10 inches	Heavy
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘African Queen’	80 inches	78 inches	Dark violet	12 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Asian Moon’†	27 inches	38 inches	Lavender	6 inches	Moderate
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Attraction’	56 inches	75 inches	Red-purple	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Black Knight’	70 inches	74 inches	Dark purple	12 inches	Heavy
★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Blue Chip’ (Lo & Behold® Blue Chip)†	30 inches	60 inches	Lavender-blue	6 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Bonnie’	54 inches	67 inches	Light lavender	10 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Border Beauty’	66 inches	89 inches	Dark lilac-purple	8 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Butterfly Heaven’	84 inches	65 inches	Lilac-purple	10 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Cornwall Blue’	27 inches	29 inches	Medium lavender	7 inches	Heavy
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Dartmoor’	78 inches	96 inches	Medium pink-purple	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Ellen’s Blue’	37 inches	44 inches	Deep blue-purple	7 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Empire Blue’	56 inches	69 inches	Violet-blue	7 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Evil Ways’	27 inches	44 inches	Dark purple	6 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Guinevere’	70 inches	88 inches	Dark purple	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Harlequin’	55 inches	69 inches	Magenta	11 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Ile de France’	72 inches	78 inches	Blue-purple	8 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Miss Molly’†	27 inches	28 inches	Bright pink-red	8 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Miss Ruby’†	56 inches	54 inches	Bright rosy pink	9 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Nanho Blue’	62 inches	74 inches	Lavender-blue	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Nanho Purple’	38 inches	52 inches	Magenta-purple	6 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Opera’	70 inches	72 inches	Purple	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Orchid Beauty’	74 inches	90 inches	Lavender	13 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Peakeep’ (Peacock™)	46 inches	51 inches	Purplish pink	11 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Potter’s Purple’	67 inches	68 inches	Light purple	6 inches	Moderate
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Purple Haze’ (Lo & Behold® Purple Haze)†	26 inches	60 inches	Purple-blue	7 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Purple Prince’	66 inches	74 inches	Magenta-red	12 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Pyrkeep’ (Purple Emperor™)	36 inches	49 inches	Light purple	7 inches	Heavy
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Red Plume’	79 inches	78 inches	Red-violet	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Royal Red’	72 inches	67 inches	Red-purple	11 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Santana’	65 inches	79 inches	Magenta-red	8 inches	Low
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Silver Frost’	65 inches	67 inches	White	8 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Snowbank’	70 inches	78 inches	White	13 inches	Moderate
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Summer Beauty’	42 inches	39 inches	Rosy pink	9 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘Summer Rose’	65 inches	96 inches	Pink-purple	14 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘White Ball’	30 inches	35 inches	White	3 inches	Moderate
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘White Bouquet’	79 inches	78 inches	White	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘White Feather’	83 inches	100 inches	White	11 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘White Harlequin’	39 inches	52 inches	White	8 inches	Low
★★★★	<i>B. davidii</i> * ‘White Profusion’	70 inches	66 inches	White	12 inches	Heavy
★★	<i>B.</i> ‘Lochinch’	46 inches	53 inches	Lavender	7 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B.</i> ‘Pink Delight’	73 inches	75 inches	Pink	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B.</i> ‘Podaras #4’ (Flutterby Grande™ Blueberry Cobbler)†	26 inches	62 inches	Lavender-blue	12 inches	Heavy
★★★	<i>B.</i> ‘Podaras #9’ (Flutterby™ Pink)†	50 inches	40 inches	Rose-pink	12 inches	Heavy
★★★★	<i>B. × weyeriana</i> ‘Bicolor’	67 inches	78 inches	Lavender and orange	10 inches	Heavy

RATINGS:

- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★ Good
- ★★ Fair
- ★ Poor

† = Sterile



TRIAL PARAMETERS

How long: A minimum of six years

Zone: 5b

Conditions: Full sun; well-drained, alkaline soil

Care: Minimal, allowing plants to thrive or fail under natural conditions. Plants were regularly cut back to about 12 inches in late winter.

Observations: Ornamental traits; growth and adaptation to environmental and soil conditions; disease or pest problems; plant injury or winter losses.

SOURCES:

The following mail-order plant sellers offer many of the butterfly bushes featured:

Forestfarm, Williams, Ore.; 541-846-7269; forestfarm.com

Nature Hills Nursery, Omaha, Neb.; 888-864-7663; naturehills.com

Plant Delights Nursery, Raleigh, N.C.; 919-772-4794; plantdelights.com

UP-AND-COMERS that are worth a second look



'Blue Chip Jr.'



Flutterby Petite™
Tutti Fruitti Pink



InSpired™ Violet

The latest offering in the seedless Lo & Behold® series and one of the smallest butterfly bushes ever is **'Blue Chip Jr.'** (*B. 'Blue Chip Jr.'*, photo, top left). An abundance of blue-purple flowers up to 5 inches long bloomed continuously throughout the first summer in the trial. At 26 inches tall and 39 inches wide, it was larger than the anticipated 2 feet tall and wide. But it was developed as a ground cover, so maybe this broader habit will be just right. I'm eager to watch 'Blue Chip Jr.' over the coming years, and I hope it proves to be hardier than 'Blue Chip' has been for us.

InSpired™ Violet (*B. 'ILVOargus2'*, photo, bottom right) had the most graceful flowers of any butterfly bush I've ever grown. Slender violet sprays arched pendulously downward from each branch, reaching an impressive 18 inches long and only a smidgen over half an inch wide. It reminded me of a butterfly-bush version of love-lies-bleeding (*Amaranthus caudatus*, annual). My mind might actually be blown away this summer if the flowers attain their purported 30-inch length. InSpired™ Violet was 44 inches tall and 61 inches wide in its first year but has the potential to be 4 to 8 feet tall and wide. The pink- and white-flowered cultivars in the seedless InSpired™ series did quite well last year, too.

The Flutterby™ series offers a choice of seedless cultivars in three sizes: small, medium, and large. In its first year, **Flutterby Petite™ Tutti Fruitti Pink** (*B. 'Podaras #13'*, photo, bottom left) bloomed its heart out with an endless show of pretty fuchsia-pink flowers, 5 inches long, from midsummer to late fall. The compact, mounded plants were only 14 inches tall and 27 inches wide, but even if they double in height over time (as expected), they'll still be small by butterfly-bush standards. ∞

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